

they *will*
call HIM
*I*mmann

ADVENT 2008
GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

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One of the most influential writings in Christian history is *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, a 15th century work widely believed to be, after the Bible, the most read Christian book ever written. Thomas was a monk who, through the practice of reflection and solitude, “in all things sought quiet.”

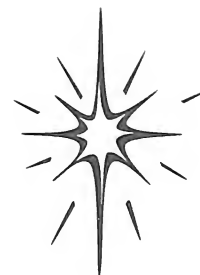
Quietness. Of all the ways we might prepare for the coming of God’s anointed during Advent, practicing the discipline of quietness may be the most important. It may also be the hardest. Advertisers, mass communication, modern technology—they all help sabotage the quest for quietness. Even in Christian worship, many churches try everything imaginable to exclude the possibility of quietness and, instead, fill our ears with sounds of one kind or another. In the midst of so much noise, Thomas à Kempis calls on followers of Christ to “Choose a fitting time to spend with yourself alone; and think often of the goodness of God.” He further suggests, “No one can safely appear in public who does not love to be alone. No one can safely speak who does not love silence.”

When I was in Cambridge last summer, I worshiped one Sunday at the Quaker meeting house. The Quakers have been meeting in Cambridge for 350 years, stressing the simple spiritual disciplines of silence, waiting, and listening. There was no minister or choir. No formal prayers. We entered the meeting room quietly, sat in a circle three rows deep, and

waited. Anyone was free to speak, pray, or read Scripture, but only if prompted by the Spirit. As a very kind woman explained to me beforehand, “There may be silence for quite some time in our meeting, but that doesn’t mean nothing is happening.” I realized, sitting there in my own restless silence, how unprepared I am to meet God in such quietness.

But I’m still trying. And I hope you will try, too. The prophet Isaiah exhorts, “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength” (30:15). Here’s hoping that this Advent book will help us to carve out some time to practice the discipline of quietness over the next four weeks. It may be just the strength we need to welcome most fully into our midst Immanuel, God with us.

My thanks to each of the writers whose thoughtful reflections fill the pages that follow, to the Development Office and to the Divinity School for their financial assistance with this project, and to all the friends and supporters of Gardner-Webb who invest their prayers, commitments, and labors into the life of our university. In grateful appreciation for all the gifts you share with us, it is our pleasure to share this Advent book with you. May God bless you with hope, peace, joy, and love this Advent season...and may you, in turn, bless others with the same.

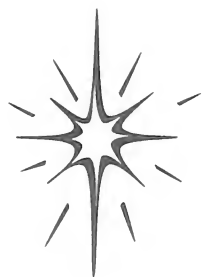


QUIETNESS

ADVENT AT
GARDNER-WEBB
2008

Daniel E. Goodman

Bob D. Shepherd
Chair of New Testament
Interpretation,
School of Divinity



HOPE

SUNDAY,
NOVEMBER 30

Isaiah 1:1-9
Matthew 25:1-13

Matt Theado

Professor,
English Department

I never liked swimming. Or maybe I should say that the kind of swimming I liked involved lying on a big towel beside a lake while eating Pringles from the can. I didn't like suiting up on chilly mornings to jump in the bleachy city pool for the swim lessons that my mom insisted I take. I was a 10-year-old kid, and each morning my swimsuit seemed to be wet already—and cold—as I pulled it up. And there were other boys who were more confident, already had goggles and swim caps, and yes, already had developed builds, while I stood knock-kneed and shivering and half blind because I had to leave my glasses in a basket in the locker room. “Learning to swim will build confidence,” we were told. Frankly, learning to swim was reducing me to jelly.

And I didn't learn to swim that summer. I was told to put my face in the water and blow, to hold to the side of the pool and kick my feet, to swing my arms in circles. Frankly, I had no faith. In our city pool, you could see clear to the bottom, even in the deepest part under the diving boards. Seeing the wavering blue bottom, way down there, under tons of water, was petrifying. What buoyancy would prevent me from slipping all the way down there? My swim instructor explained, “Once you learn to swim, you won't be afraid of deep water.” But the onus was entirely on me: “once you learn to swim.” I was the one who would have to undertake the change, and I couldn't envision that. I was certain that I didn't have what it took to be a swimmer.

That was nearly 40 years ago, and sometime since, I began to swim. I still shiver too easily, I am still at a loss without my glasses, and I still wish that my build was a bit more up to par. But when I push off from the pool side and splash on, working my stroke, I often marvel at the clear water beneath me, at the wavering pool bottom slipping past, and wonder what keeps me afloat. Is this my own acquired skill? Did I learn to swim? By whose grace?

However this came, I find myself splashing along, sputtering and happy, somehow not sinking, heading toward the other end.

HOPE: Trust; to long for with expectation of attainment (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1974)

When our daughter, Danielle, unexpectedly lost her hearing at a very young age, she was a blessing to all of us. Instead of allowing this drastic change to adversely affect her, Danielle went on with life as usual, excitedly preparing for kindergarten and the chance to go to school with her brother.

One of the few difficulties Danielle had was settling down and going to sleep. On more than one occasion, we would look in on her at 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. and Danielle would be playing or coloring peacefully in her room. The combination of a dark room without being able to hear caused Danielle a little anxiety and she resisted falling asleep.

One night, our "problem" disappeared. While putting Danielle to bed, she asked me a series of questions:

"Are all of the doors and windows locked?"

"Would you make sure all the lights are turned off?"

"Do you know the sounds of all the different storms?"

"Will you come in and get me if we have a storm?"

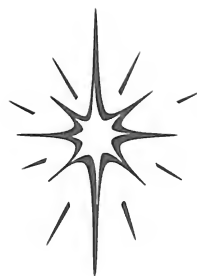
"Are we safe?" and "Do you love me?"

Once all these questions were answered, Danielle was satisfied and she quickly fell asleep.

This became our regular routine at bedtime, she would ask the questions and I would answer them. Danielle had the expectation that if any danger arose, she would be taken care of. She had hope.

A couple years ago, Danielle and I were in her bedroom, doing the questions, when she added a new twist to the routine. She asked, "Daddy, what will happen if the man I am supposed to marry won't answer my questions?" My eyes quickly filled with tears and I told her that she didn't have to worry, that he probably wasn't the man God intended for her to marry. I assured Danielle that I would have a talk with her future husband and explain this important role he would be inheriting from me.

In this season of Advent, what provides you with hope? In the text for today from Isaiah, God offers hope to all who willingly turn from their wicked ways. My prayer for each of you is that, like Danielle, you can ask "questions" of God so that you can experience the hope that the Advent season brings.



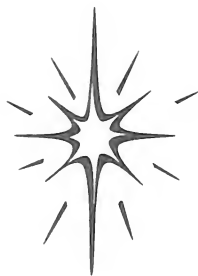
HOPE

MONDAY,
DECEMBER 1

Isaiah 1:10-20
Luke 20:1-8

Chuck Burch

Vice President for Athletics



HOPE

TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 2

Isaiah 1:21-31
Luke 20:9-18

Lane Wesson

Assistant Professor,
School of Education

One doesn't necessarily couple the concept of hope with that of loss. Loss is concrete. It usually means that something is missing; that there is a space in your life where someone used to be, but is no more. Hope is abstract. It is a sensation, a feeling that doesn't often present itself in the physical realm of our world. However, most deal with loss by experiencing hope.

December 3rd is a special day for my sisters and me. Tomorrow would have been my father's 73rd birthday. Every year the family would take my father out to dinner to celebrate his life. We maintained that tradition until we suffered our loss; a loss that took our father out of our space, out of this physical world. This was especially devastating to me because my father was a person who inspired me to hope; to hope for a brighter future, a family, a prosperous life rich with wonderful experiences and close friends. I did not realize how inspirational my father was to me and to others until he was gone. As many of you have experienced with your own loss, I felt lost and alone. Who would inspire me to hope now? Whom would I turn to for advice? I asked these questions one night during prayer shortly after my loss to which I received a short and simple answer, "Me."

You see, I realized in the depths of my despair that God is the primary source of hope in my life. The loss that I had experienced brought me closer to Him. I was reminded that through Him I could do all things, even let go. I was reminded

that hope can carry me until I see my father again. Through my loss I found hope.

When I think about how my life would be without hope I am drawn to Isaiah 1:30 which states that "you will be like an oak with fading leaves, like a garden without water." Webster's defines hope as "trust; one in which trust or confidence is placed." My trust, my confidence is placed in the Lord Jesus Christ without whom I would be like an oak with fading leaves.

During this Advent season it is my wish that each of you will be refreshed and renewed in anticipation of the coming of Christ who is our provider of hope during the darkest of days.

Where does our hope come from? One of the most valuable learning experiences I have had was during our experience in Swaziland. We were there to serve the Swazi people through human needs. I knew that I was going to make a difference in the lives of the Swazi people through meeting their basic need. It took me by surprise when God used them to impact my life and teach me about a basic spiritual need. Those precious people have a true understanding of hope.

Isaiah 2 speaks about the last days and the glorious establishment of the LORD's temple. There is hope in this verse. One day we will be able to be in the presence of the Lord. He will judge the people, settle their disputes, peace will reign. We will be able to go into the house of God and He will teach us. Later in the chapter we are told that "the eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low."

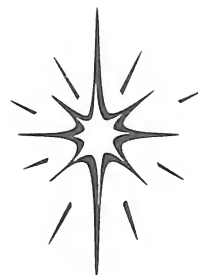
It was through the humbleness and hope of the Swazi people that I began to understand what it means to place our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. These people have very little. Many are sick and dying as AIDS is ravaging their country. The average life expectancy is just over 30 years old. They are impoverished.

As an outsider looking at the state of their nation, I saw very little hope. However during the years

of ministering with the Swazis and seeing God miraculously meet their needs, I began to realize where my hope comes from. Not from worldly goods. Not from prosperity. Not from health. My hope comes from the Lord. I was taught that we are to place our hope in the future glory that we will obtain through being a child of God.

The Swazis embraced me and my family. Out of their poverty, they gave to us of their time, possessions and talents. Out of their despair, they showed us hope and life—a life in Christ. Hope in a glorious future and hope for today.

So where do you place your hope? Is it in this world which is quickly passing away, where we are but just a moment in time, a grain of sand blown in the wind? Or is it in Jesus Christ and the future He has for us?



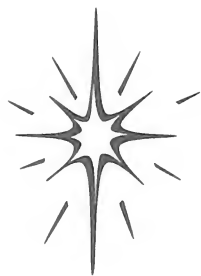
HOPE

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 3

Isaiah 2:1-11
Luke 20:19-26

Greg Poe

Major Gifts Officer,
Director of Planned Giving



HOPE

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 4

Isaiah 2:12-22
Luke 20:27-40

Danny West

Associate Professor of
Preaching and Pastoral Studies,
Executive Director,
Doctor of Ministry Program,
School of Dvinity

“He is not the God of the dead but the living.”
(Luke 20:38)

As a minister I’ve often noted that something strange and wonderful commences within the life of the church during the holy days of Advent. Come to think of it, something strange happened during the season of Lent and Holy Week, too. I guess we are instinctively drawn to the dual mysteries of our faith: Incarnation and Resurrection.

In the church it is easy to sense the stirring of anticipation and life that Advent hope announces. It is understandable. The days of Advent that walk us toward the celebration of the birth of the Christ child are not theological flat liners; his birth jolted all of creation to life. The world was transformed from dull gray to Technicolor in one holy Bethlehem moment.

Some years ago in Louisville, Kentucky I happened upon one of the most remarkable human photo-op moments I have ever encountered. It was Christmastime. The stores were brightly decorated. One of the merchants even piped Christmas music out into the street. I felt as if I were standing in the middle of a Norman Rockwell scene. Having finished my shopping, I hopped in my car to head home when out of the corner of my eye I noticed an elfish, relic of a man bundled up in a top coat and hat. He looked to be close to 90. I couldn’t help but notice that he was up to something.

Believe me you know it when 90-year olds are into mischief!

He was standing off the sidewalk in a grassy area and he was bumping something with his foot and laughing out loud. It took me a moment to see what he was doing. It seems that this old man had stumbled upon a discarded soccer ball lying in the grass by the side of the road. The old man could barely stand yet with tiny, frail steps he would inch toward the ball and give it a gentle kick (I suspect in his mind he was a World Cup champion!). He kicked the ball a few inches, reared his back and laughed with gusto. He scooted forward and did it again and again. For just a moment I knew what I was witnessing. He was a kid again.

The power of Advent is inextricably linked to the power of the gospel. God is up to something among us. He renews our spirits. He jolts us to life. This is no “God of the dead but the living”—the kind of living that transforms old men into little boys again. Thanks be to God!

In 1833, Alfred Lord Tennyson fell into a deep depression when his close friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, died suddenly while travelling in Europe. To cope with his grief Tennyson began writing poetry, describing his loss, his pain, and his doubt. He published those poems—133 elegies written over several years—in 1849 as *In Memoriam* with the subtitle, “the way of the soul.”

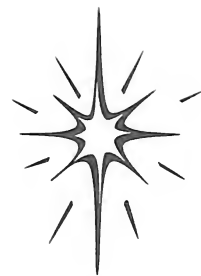
T.S. Eliot claims this collection “expresses the mood of his generation,” a mood of loss and doubt that occurred as Tennyson and others witnessed a series of sweeping changes. Within a few decades England shifted from a rural, agrarian economy to one based on urban manufacturing. Technological inventions fostered the growth in manufacturing but had many negative consequences, and many regions suffered severe unemployment. As families moved to cities to find work, those cities faced severe overcrowding, poverty, crime and, disease. Finally, several scientific advances and theories, like the changes in the economy and technology, seemed to separate the country from its cultural, historical, and religious foundations. Consequently, Tennyson was already questioning human progress and humanity’s purpose. The loss of his lifelong friend compounded his sorrow and uncertainty. As a result, *In Memoriam* records more than loss of a loved one.

Tennyson’s elegies trace his progression from despair to hope, and the arrival of Christmas marks each new phase. In December 1833, Tennyson confesses he “almost wish’d no more to wake.” But when he hears the “The Christmas bells from hill to hill/Answer each other in the mist” his sorrow is briefly “touched with joy” and he accepts his friend’s death. By the third Christmas, the bells echo Tennyson’s hopefulness as they “ring out the grief that saps the mind.” Now the bells also toll Tennyson’s hope for England’s problems as they “Ring out the want, the care, the sin/The faithless coldness of the times.” And, his faith and expectations for human progress reverberate in the poem’s final stanza:

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

Like Tennyson, we often experience periods of pain and doubt. Tennyson’s experiences and his poetry remind us that we too can find hope, especially at Christmas:

Rise, happy morn, rise, holy morn,
Draw forth the cheerful day from night:
O Father, touch the east, and light
The light that shone when Hope was born.



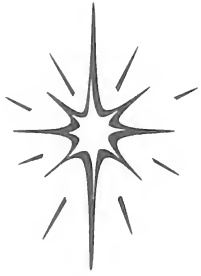
HOPE

FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 5

Isaiah 3:8-15
Luke 20:41-21:4

Janet S. Land

Professor,
English Department



HOPE

SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 6

Isaiah 4:2-6
Luke 21:5-19

Jackson Rainer

Dean, Graduate School

According to Greek mythology, Pandora, the first mortal woman, received a box from Zeus that she was forbidden to open. The box contained all human blessings and all human curses. However, temptation overcame restraint, and Pandora opened it. In a moment, all the curses were released into the world, and all the blessings escaped and were lost—except one, hope. For it was known: without hope, mortals could not endure.

Hope arrives when we recognize that there are real options and that we have genuine choices. Hope flourishes when we believe that what we do makes a difference, that our actions can bring a future different from the present. To have hope, then, is to acquire a belief in our ability to have some control over our circumstances. As a psychologist, I believe that hope is based on the possibility greater than zero that an objective can be reached. Hope has wings. When we hope for something, we employ our thoughts and memory that marshal information and data relevant to a desired future event. When we hope, we generate a different picture of our condition in our mind; we are lifted up. Without hope, we live in the presence of despair, surely an unpleasant place to reside. So, to have hope is not to capitulate to despair, no matter how slim the chance for satisfaction, but to rise to a higher plane of belief and thinking. Rather than defying human reason, hope allows us to share divine wisdom.

I saw a patient several years ago who was dying of cancer. During one visit, he said, “I hope I will be cured.” As the disease progressed, he told me, “I hope that I will be missed.” At the very end of his life, he quietly said, “I hope that I will not die in pain.” I learned from this brave fellow that hope adjusts as reality intervenes. Living in the presence of the facts of his decline allowed him to make lovely connections to heal, even when cure was impossible.

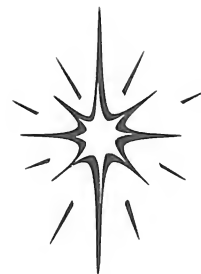
Belief and expectation, essential to the advent season, combine together as the key ingredients of hope. It changes us profoundly in spirit and in body. Every day, I look for hope, for those I love, for my community, and for myself. It is an ongoing search. Hope attaches me to God, and allows me to ascend into the realm of the mystery of the spirit. This is its essence.

The parables in Luke reminded me of two stories from my life. When I was a child, I had the family reputation of never being satisfied. I look back now with amazement that my parents were so accommodating, but they actually let me change everyone's bedrooms around a couple of times a year. I would wake up on a Saturday morning and decide, for instance, I wanted the room my parents were currently occupying and, by the end of the day, my parents, my brothers and I would all be sleeping in rooms different from the ones we had slept in Friday night. One Saturday morning, I decided I wanted a full-size bed instead of the twin bed I had always slept in. My mom called relatives until she located a bed that was available to be borrowed. When we went to get it later in the day, she said to my cousin, "Sheri is *never* satisfied." Bless his heart, he took my side and said, "Maybe when we are satisfied it is time to die."

Years later, when I was in seminary, I participated for several summers in an excavation in Israel. The first year, the group stayed in a camp with modest accommodations and simple food. Oh, the griping and complaining and bellyaching that went on! The next year, the director was able to get us accommodations in a five star hotel. We stayed in the basic accommodations but ate in the same dining room as the guests paying five star prices, had access to the Olympic-sized pool, the tennis courts, everything. We also had maid service every day. Our sheets were

changed daily, our rooms cleaned and requests for this and that were respectfully fulfilled. If the director of the dig imagined that people were going to be satisfied, he was sadly mistaken. People complained that the maid had made up the bed with the top sheet too short, that the strawberry shortcake had too much icing, that the hotel staff needed an entire day to get laundry done.

Not just in this passage do we see Jesus baffled and bewildered by how unsatisfied human beings are. Jesus' life was no picnic, but he seems to really enjoy the simple pleasures of life: eating, drinking, friends and family, vocation. As I write these words, most people in North America are poorer than they were a few months ago, and none of us knows what the end of this spiral will look like. We can be sure, though, that we can't go wrong to follow the example of Jesus and find joy and satisfaction in the things that finally matter most.



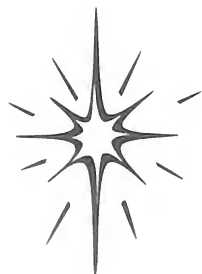
PEACE

SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 7

Isaiah 5:1-7
Luke 7:28-35

Sheri Adams

Professor of
Christian History,
School of Divinity



PEACE

MONDAY,
DECEMBER 8

Isaiah 5:8-23
Luke 21:20-28

Michael Kuchinsky

Assistant Professor
of Political Science

If advent is the season of expectant waiting, and by waiting becomes the liturgical season that bids us to live in hope, then an Advent-like insight on the concerns for “peace” pushes us to think about the difference between a world without peace, the pursuit of peace, and being at peace.

Those differences must have been envisioned by the writers of today’s texts and by those who experienced their images. There was an audience who saw a Jerusalem encircled, who experienced the type of desperation that comes when there are no clear ways of escape; certainly none that bridge the life that one has known with a future that can’t be imagined. The destruction of Jerusalem and its historic promises to a chosen people were all too real.

Likewise the prospects of peace are examined by Isaiah in frighteningly contemporary imagery. Like a modern policy pundit, he points at a dualistic society separating those whose life was sheer leisure and mass-consumption from those whose limited resources are gone, and for whom the questions of just productivity and distribution are outweighed by decisions to make profit through scarcity. Isaiah’s world is where language is used for any purpose that suits the moment, and truth and falsehood equally valued. Here were worlds without peace, just as any present-day place that knows no justice.

The authors prescribe and counsel through their texts. Who, once one’s eyes have been opened to see that which destroys the possibilities of peace, can continue to state that they have “no knowledge?” Who can continue to tolerate, even advance, global injustice once they have been invited to see its fruits? These writers were witnesses and invited their audiences to consider their parts in the drama between peace and no peace. And so the indictment comes out from their descriptions of society: “pursue peace.”

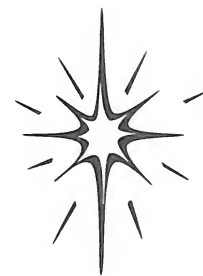
But the paradox of Advent does not come only between the charge to awaken to the prospects of violence and the invitation to a vocation of peace-building in the midst of structural or personal conflict. It comes by a conviction—restored perhaps by looking honestly at such realities and horrors—that these realities will not be determinative for any world. For the Holy One will be made clear, known, present (Isaiah 5:16, Luke 21:27). That is the assurance that is peace for the listeners of Isaiah and Luke. It is what they hold on to as they expectantly wait, as they work for peace, and as they point out places of their worlds where God’s people know no peace.

The God of Christmas is a little baby. He's the smallest figure in the nativity scene I carefully unpack every year, the "little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay" and "Holy Infant so tender and mild" of nineteenth-century carols. Is it any wonder that the first hymns most children learn are about that baby or at least about a kind, non-threatening Jesus no bigger than a father or mother? We wouldn't want little ones to be frightened of God, of course, so we teach them "Away in a Manger," "Silent Night," and "Jesus Loves Me."

In its original context, though, "Jesus Loves Me," would terrify sensitive children. Two years before William Bradbury composed the tune to which children now sing that hymn, Anna B. Warner crafted the words for an episode in the 1860 novel *Say and Seal*, which she wrote with her sister Susan. In the story, a little boy named Johnny is dying of tuberculosis. On his last day on earth, Johnny is in agonizing pain and asks his Sunday School teacher, Mr. Linden, to hold him. To comfort the child, Mr. Linden carries Johnny around the room singing "Jesus Loves Me." The words speak directly to a child who knows he will not live to grow up: "Jesus loves me—loves me still/ Though I'm very weak and ill/ From his shining home on high/ Comes to watch me where I lie." "Jesus Loves Me" is more than a simple child's song if the child in question is facing the ultimate mystery!

The baby God of "Away in a Manger" takes on a deeper meaning too in the Biblical context of Isaiah 5 and Luke 21. Isaiah 5 describes a ferocious God of Wrath who punishes those who ignore his call for social justice, makes mountains tremble, and strews the "corpses" of evil doers "like refuse in the streets." Luke 21 anticipates the end of time and calls all Christians to "be alert . . . , praying that you may have the strength to escape" the "days of vengeance."

If "sweet little Jesus boy" is also the Righteous God who lays waste to wrongdoers, then peace on earth is a great deal more than a silent night in the little town of Bethlehem. Peace can transform us and our world if we recognize the power packed into that tiny baby.



PEACE

TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 9

Isaiah 5:13-25
Luke 21:29-38

June Hadden Hobbs

Professor,
English Department



PEACE

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 10

Isaiah 6:1-13
John 7:53-8:11

Paula Fontana Qualls

Professor,
Department of
Religious Studies
and Philosophy

“When peace like a river attendeth my way....”
When Horatio Spafford penned the words to the familiar hymn, “It is Well with My Soul,” he was on a ship passing over the waters where his four daughters had previously drowned. I am inspired and challenged by his story. How did he find this peace in the midst of such sorrow and loss?

“When sorrows like sea billows roll....”
For many of us, the Advent season is difficult because we are grieving the loss of a loved-one whose absence is ever before us. How will we find peace again?

When I was a sophomore in college, this became my reality. Tragedy met my family as my precious little sister was hit by a drunk driver. Our family was immediately thrown into a crisis that lasted for 10 days. During one of those dark days of waiting in the hospital, the chaplain asked my parents, “What will you do if you do not take your daughter home with you?” I was numb. What would we do? How would we survive? I could not imagine life without her. I did not believe that I would be able to cope with such loss. But the loss came. A few days later, my sister died, and we wondered how we would pick up the pieces and move on.

“Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
‘it is well, it is well with my soul.’”
Miraculously...slowly, but surely, we were able to move on. We found comfort. It came

through prayer—crying out to the Lord in deep grief. It came through talking and laughing as we remembered the good times with family and friends, and celebrated her life. It came through the community of faith who embraced me and my family, and so beautifully filled the void left behind in our lives. Peace came as well. I discovered a wellspring of life as I processed my grief through prayer. My darkest moments gave way to a deeper, enriched faith, and I encountered the Comforter in a way that I had never known before. Peace in the midst of the storm.

It is my hope and prayer for all of us to find peace this Advent season as we enter into the Lord’s presence. For when we enter into his presence, we experience Divine healing, Divine comfort, Divine cleansing, and Divine peace that transcend our circumstances.

One of the hardest things we have to do as people is to realize that we are all just mere pieces in the framework of God's plan. We try so hard to organize for the future, often without God first. But, if you are a follower of God, the plan he wants is totally different from your own.

Years ago, I planned where I would be in my life at this point. Where I would live, what I would make and what my profession would be. My plan was to be a United States Marine and, by this point, be a 1st Lieutenant. I was going to catapult myself through the ranks and become the Commandant of the Marine Corps. I felt this road would make me a more accomplished person. I decided that through the Marines, both the satisfaction of meeting a challenge and the success of achieving goals were present.

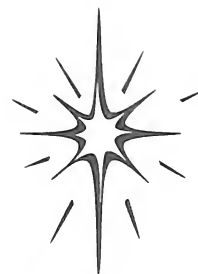
God intervened, though. He put me at Gardner-Webb University as a staff member after being a student. Everything lined up in favor of staying here instead of forcing my personal dream. I thought at first that I would never be fulfilled, but I had another opportunity that I did not see coming. God put me in a situation to minister to people through the martial arts.

I have studied in martial arts since age seven and I realized that all of the fulfillment that I thought the Marines could give me, I got through martial arts. I had struggles, victories,

failures and lessons learned that were essential to my growth. There was a strong sense of joy with training.

God has put me in a position where I can give that feeling to others. I now have a secure job, opportunity for higher education and my own martial arts school in Shelby. God showed me that joy is key to happiness. Joy cannot be taken from you. When you follow the plan of God, the joy in your life is multiplied tenfold.

The coming of Jesus illustrates this realization. Everyone had their own way that things needed to be, but Jesus showed them God's way. When people got on that straight and narrow path, there were doubters, obstacles, struggles and heartaches. But the one thing that has proven true is that when the storm is over, joy comes in the morning. I have that joy in my life now.



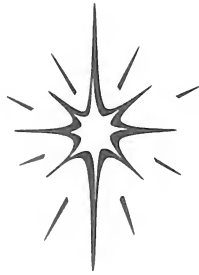
PEACE

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 11

Isaiah 7:1-9
Luke 22:1-13

Brandon M. Beach

Graduate Admissions
Counselor



PEACE

FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 12

Isaiah 7:10-25

Luke 22:14-30

Nancy-Pat Dire

Adjunct Professor,
Communication Studies

I was born and raised in Buffalo, N.Y., where it snows quite a bit during winter. Because of that, Advent is the season of greatest peace for me.

It wasn't always that way. As a child, I equated winter with snow and Christmas, the most exciting time of the year. The anticipation of Christmas vacation and a pile of gifts to open Christmas morning was almost impossible to bear. December 25 couldn't arrive fast enough.

Snow provided a distraction from the anticipation, by giving new options for playing with kids in the neighborhood. Summers' milkweed wars, kickball, roller skating and baseball were replaced with snowball fights, sledding, ice skating and hockey.

But the distraction was temporary; the anticipation would strike afresh when I brought my frozen little self back inside the house, for there stood the Christmas tree. I'd work myself into a frenzy again.

As the years went by, the anticipation of gifts gave way to the anticipation of familiar holiday season routines and seeing family and friends. Because I was no longer blinded by the want of opening gifts under the tree, I began to appreciate other gifts of the season.

Snow had always been a desirable thing, because it meant fun and perhaps an unplanned day off from school. As I got older, its capacity for

making the world a beautiful and peaceful place dawned on me. There is such joy in the pristine white landscape after a real snowfall!

Snow insulates and muffles all sounds. That makes it so much easier to hear the sounds of nature and hear my own thoughts, both of which get ignored too often in our busy world.

The silence and automatic sense of peace that come along with snow are some of the best gifts of the Christmas season. Sometimes I bundle up on a winter's night and sit in a pile of fresh snow, creating an easy chair of sorts. I am free from indoor distractions; the hubbub in my brain quiets and I find amazement in the wondrous elements of nature.

That leads me to think about the fact that God created all these things, and on top of that, gave us his son to redeem us.

That is the second and better gift of peace that comes with snow: time to reflect on the gift of Jesus Christ and remember that he is there always, loving and faithful, in every season, even when I get too busy to think about him.

I wonder how I would have found these gifts if I'd been raised in Las Vegas.

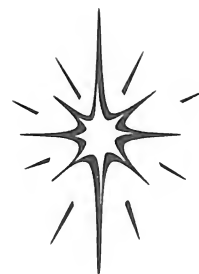
The Enlightenment's goal was for man to solve his own problems without the help of a god. In this environment science became the mainstay for solving problems. As we moved into late modernity, N.T. Wright (2005, *The Last Word*) says that "late modernity has tried to squeeze more and more areas of human discourse into the first type of 'truth' making a 'fact' out of everything and thereby trying to put everything into the kind of box which can be weighed, measured and verified as if it were an experiment in the hard sciences like chemistry."

Wars, massacres, hate crimes, criminal activity of the recent past have been evidences that humankind cannot solve its problems. Many in the West, when they realized that humankind could not solve its own problems, gave up the search for truth and accepted despair. In such an environment truth is created individually, thereby creating a plurality of truths.

What really happened, though, was a sense of hopelessness and despair was created because all beliefs have been equalized. The hope of finding truth or a unity of knowledge was lost. The result, as Lesslie Newbigin (Weston, 2006, *Lesslien Newbigin: Missionary Theologian*) indicates, is that from the Enlightenment we are left with skepticism and cynicism. But isn't there a better way? Was all of life lost to selecting truth like selecting cars from a car lot?

In their search to find a way out of humankind's problems, the Enlightenment thinkers forgot about the Fall of Adam and Eve. They dismissed the God of the Bible and replaced him with a god disinterested in his creation—a god that matches their orientation toward science, one that is impersonal. This is not the picture the Bible paints of God. Scripture tells us that God is so intimately involved with his creation even after the Fall that he did the insufferable—he did what Abraham was not allowed to do—he sacrificed his own Son on behalf of sinful creatures who willfully chose to exclude God.

Through this first Advent, God tenderly and lovingly became one of us. Jesus walked in our time, in our space, and participated in our story. For us, ultimately God turned his face away from his Son so that we can have hope as the adopted children of God. What joy and peace we have even in these economically turbulent times—joy we need to share with the world. The Advent of the Christ brings to us joy and hopefulness—and an answer to our problems. Share this answer—the intimate love of Christ with another this Christmas.



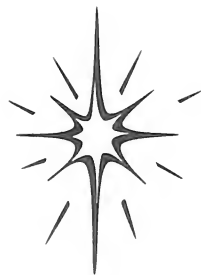
PEACE

SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 13

Isaiah 8:1-15
Luke 22:31-38

Carroll Smith

Associate Professor,
School of Education



JOY

SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 14

Isaiah 13:6-13
John 3:22-30

Jeremy Fern

Director of Admissions,
School of Divinity

In 1719, Isaac Watts penned one of the best-known Christmas songs ever, “Joy to the World.” Most of my life, I’ve paralleled this carol to the birth of Jesus (which was the original intent of the lyrics). Now, though, consider Christ’s return, instead. “Joy to the world! The Lord is come: let earth receive her king...No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground...He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.” That gives a whole new meaning to this classic carol, doesn’t it? It proclaims joy, for Christ has come and no more must we live in a tainted, sinful, imperfect world. What a joyous day that will be! Let earth receive the real king, Jesus. No more do sin and sorrow grow in our hearts and no more must we live among those who steal, kill, and destroy. Jesus comes to gather His children.

While Jesus’ birth and return are sources of joy for Christians, His birth was a source of hostility for many of that day and His return brings judgment for the unbeliever. To the believer: “The day of the Lord is near! Rejoice!” To the unbeliever: “The day of the Lord is near! Wail!” How can the same “day” bring both rejoicing and wailing? This is Isaiah’s prophecy against Babylon and its people: “Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty...See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.” To the unbeliever, the

“day” of the Lord will be a day of mourning and wailing. And yet, for the believer, the Lord’s “day” is the day of our deliverance. So while we as believers can be joyful of the day when we meet Jesus face to face, we also know that along with that day comes the condemnation of all who do not know Jesus.

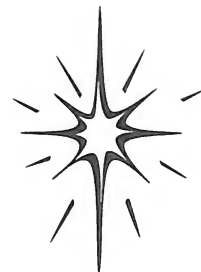
So let your joy be complete in the coming of our Lord, but let your joy be a reminder that there is still a message to share. “The Lord is...not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Let us hold on to this joy, and with the strength He has given us, help others to know this joy so that they will also rejoice in the “day” of our Lord’s coming.

“Don’t let him rob you of your joy.” I am convinced the words my husband spoke to me that day were directed by the Holy Spirit. I had been very frustrated for a couple of days over a situation with another person. When he said that simple sentence to me, God stopped me in my tracks. I realized that, not only was that person stealing my joy, but I was allowing him to do it! My attitude changed at that very moment. I began thinking of how many times I had allowed Satan to rob me of my joy as well.

Joy and happiness are not the same. Happiness is dependent on my outward circumstances, and I certainly wasn’t happy with the situation, but joy is in spite of my circumstances and is determined by my inward condition, that of my personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Trying situations may not make me happy, but I can be joyful deep within. John 15:11 says, “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” Jesus wants to give me His joy, and He wants me to experience it to the fullest. Why should I allow anyone or anything to take that away from me? The Bible says many times that we are to “rejoice always” and that we are to consider it all joy when we face various trials. How can we do that? I know the only reason I can rejoice in trying situations is to remind myself that God wants the best for me and is continuing to work in my life to bring about His plan for me. I may encounter many tough situations, but if I keep

reminding myself to be focused on Him, I can truly rejoice in everything, knowing that “the joy of the Lord is [my] strength.” (Nehemiah 8:10)

This Christmas season, as well as throughout the year, keep focused on Jesus and the precious gift we have because of Him, and don’t let anyone or anything rob you of your joy in Him.



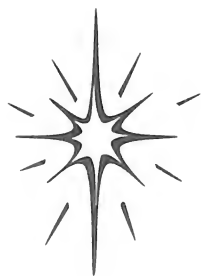
JOY

MONDAY,
DECEMBER 15

Isaiah 8:16-9:1
Luke 22:39-53

Alison Kernicky

Administrative Assistant
to the Vice President
for Athletics



JOY

TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 16

Isaiah 9:1-7
Luke 22:54-69

Eddie Stepp

Associate Professor,
Department of Religious Studies
and Philosophy

The advent calendar says we are smack dab in the middle of “joy week.” However, if you are like many Americans, dealing with the reality of only eight more shopping days until Christmas (less than 200 hours!), “joy” may not be the word that best describes your mindset. The din of the crowds, the roar of obligations, and the warbling of Johnny Mathis and his many Christmas caroling crooners may make joy yet another item on our wish list, but we have little hope of receiving it. For others, the acute pain of tragedy and loss are magnified during the holidays and this week may seem far from joyful. Maybe this is the first year without a parent or spouse or child, and while we may know the tune and words to “Joy to the World,” we may not know joy.

While most of us would never mistake a partridge (minus the pear tree) for an eagle, it is unfortunate that far too many people confuse happiness and joy. Happiness is a reaction to our circumstances. Events are to our liking, so we feel happy. Joy is a decision of the will based on trust in a Great God. Even though difficulties may abound, nevertheless, we choose joy. James 1:2 tells us to “Consider it all joy when you encounter various trials.”

Hebrews 12:2 says that “for the joy set before him,” Jesus endured the cross and scorned its shame. In other words, trials, circumstances, and even death on a cross are not a deterrent

to true joy. Perhaps long lines, strapped budgets, and personal loss should not deter our joy either—not that we dismiss flippantly these realities, but we recognize that true joy, unlike fleeting happiness, is not determined by outward circumstances.

I have come to believe that while happiness is based on our circumstances, joy is based on our perspective. Happiness is microscope living—carefully studying all the details. Joy is telescope living—learning to live with the bigger picture in mind. With the telescope in hand, we are reminded that there is more than the mundane—there is One who offers purpose to our days. There is more than crowds and hectic living—there is a Prince of Peace who reigns. There is more than grief and loss and darkness—there is a God who has sent a great light into the world. And instead of offering us happiness (not a bad thing), God says that joy is possible because a child is born. May God grant us the perspective to know joy.

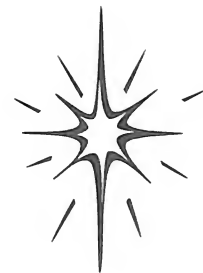
“Once upon a time” is the beginning of many beloved children’s stories that ultimately end with “and they all lived happily ever after.”

As we mature the kinds of things that make us happy change but all too often our expectation of what brings us happiness, the things that we think will allow us to live happily ever after, do not. We tend to buy into the “if only” theory: if only I could lose ten pounds, earn more money, buy that car, have a bigger house—you fill in the blank. Once attained, the “if only” changes and happiness eludes us once again. It seems that often our ability to be happy is based on circumstance.

So how is happiness different from joy? According to *Webster’s Dictionary* happiness is defined as “marked by good luck” whereas joy is defined as “delight.” How often the scripture tells us to delight in the Lord! As Christians we can and should live joyful lives. Why? Because we know that God, loving us more than we can even begin to comprehend, chose to send His son to us in a way that we could understand, that of a baby. We know that the infant grew “in wisdom and stature,” modeling for us a way of life by caring for others and sharing the love of the Father, and loved us so much that he wanted us to not just know God, but be in relationship with him, always. In order for that to happen, he had to die on a cross. That could have been a real deal breaker. From what I have read, crucifixion is the cruelest of deaths. How

much do you have to love someone to be willing to suffer and die for them? Thankfully, most of us will never have to know the answer. Jesus did. But the story doesn’t end here, we know that he was “crucified, dead, and buried. On the third day he rose again...” And that is why we can choose to live with joy, because we are loved more than we can possibly know by a God that wants to know us personally.

Due to this circumstance or that, there might be times when we won’t be happy this advent season or in the New Year, but I encourage you to remember that because of a baby, we really can live joyfully ever after.



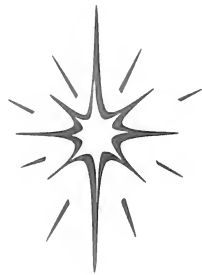
JOY

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 17

Isaiah 9:8-17
Mark 1:1-8

Alyssa Dodd

Circulation Manager,
John R. Dover Memorial Library



JOY

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 18

Isaiah 9:18-10:4
Matthew 3:1-12

Thom Black

Student Accounts
Representative,
Business Office

The Scouting movement proved to be one of the more positive influences of my youth. A small Methodist church in my neighborhood provided the resources needed to support a scout troop. A number of men from that congregation ministered in various volunteer leadership positions and were influential male role models.

Important Scouting precepts were instilled within us during those formative days and the gentlemen who gave of their time and energy as our leaders provided living examples of what characteristics a man should possess. We were taught—and exposed to living examples of—such notions as being courteous and kind, trustworthy and loyal, obedient and reverent. The concept of doing a good turn daily, of serving others, was a critical shift in focus that, unfortunately, some adolescents never achieved as evidenced by the self-absorbed, self-centered approach to life we too often see in our society today.

Perhaps one of the most important precepts of Scouting was embodied in the movement's motto: "Be Prepared." We were taught to look ahead, to anticipate, and to plan for contingencies. If you were camping, you trenched your tent even if the sun might be shining at the moment because a thunderstorm and heavy rain might be in the offing later in the day or night. We were taught first aid in

case of injury and knowledge of survival skills to handle worst case scenarios.

Much of the preparation we do in life is in anticipation of the potentially bad things that may occur. We proactively prepare for the worst whether it's putting dollars into an emergency fund or making sure we have a jack and a spare tire in the trunk of the car before heading out on the highway.

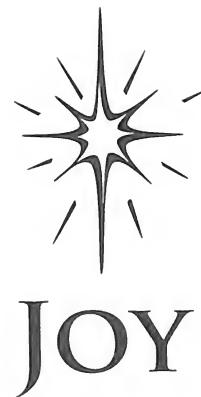
But how often do we actively prepare to be receptive to the many good things, the little joys, surrounding us daily? We may do that through a morning devotional or by intentionally noticing the beauty of God's creation as we venture forth into the day's activities. We can also foster receptivity to joyful moments through simple human interactions such as a genuine smile gladly given or a compliment sincerely offered.

Be prepared today to actively look for God's presence bearing in mind that, frequently, it is in the small joys of life that we get to experience tidbits of grace amidst the gloom. However, we have to be prepared for it, to actively anticipate and long for it, if we are to be aware of and recognize it as it occurs. What will you choose to do to actively prepare your way and that of others this day?

Amidst all of the political and economical turmoil it can become difficult to find joy in your everyday life. Sometimes I wish that I was still a child and oblivious to all of the problems and destruction in the world. I have been the type to find the brighter side of every situation ever since I was a child. I believe that God places people into your life to fill your voids and create opportunities for growth. A little over 4 years ago I met my husband Jack. The amount of joy that he brought into my life was immeasurable. I had finally met the one person who understood me and accepted all of my little quirks. This, of course, I thought would be a massive undertaking for anyone. God bless him.

Jack is the recipient of a heart/double lung transplant. He had this procedure done almost 11 years ago and is doing wonderfully. A person's perception of a certain situation can limit or produce joy in another. When Jack told me about his transplant I was not filled with sorrow or despair but more with amazement and joy. I can only imagine the excitement that Jack's family felt when they found a donor and were able to see an immediate improvement in their son's health and attitude. Jack has had art as an outlet to express his feelings about his situation. What a wonderful gift that God has blessed him with. This gift not only helps him heal emotionally but can help others understand more about organ donation and transplantation. Jack is very lucky to have such a wonderful support system.

His family is truly a blessing to him as well as to me. I have also been blessed with an amazing family and friends. If you take a step back and look at all of your relationships, isn't it remarkable how everyone falls in to place and has played some small role in your life—like a puzzle? My mom always used to say that “God is good and always on time.” In every bad situation there are many lessons learned which benefit you in the future. Christmas reminds me of just how lucky we are and fills my heart with joy. Thinking about all that has been sacrificed so that we can live reminds me to be grateful. We should find joy in all the small things in life. “God is good and always on time.”



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 19

Isaiah 10:5-19
Matthew 11:2-15

Cary Caldwell

Assistant Manager,
Campus Shop



SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 20

Isaiah 10:20-27
Luke 3:15-20

John Bridges

Director of
Church Relations

Luke writes, “The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might be the Messiah.” Nothing creates hope like expectant hearts. For centuries, the people of God had waited. From the Exodus to Mount Sinai, from the Judges to the Prophets from the exile to liberation, the people of God had waited. Time after time their expectant hearts had been broken. But they waited still. And once again their hearts were high with expectation. Could John be the one? Could John be the Messiah?

John himself answered their hope by deflecting their expectation and pointing to Jesus: “Jesus is the one you are awaiting. Jesus is the one you are expecting.”

I celebrated recently what has come to be known at our house one of the 5 greatest days of my life: the birthday of my youngest child, Rebekah. And the only thing that exceeded the anticipation of the great day was the joy that the arrival of that day brought. Birthdays are a big deal in our family. The traditional breakfast of pancakes with candles, dinner on the bright red “You are special today” birthday plate, and of course the gifts make the day a joyful experience. Nothing is more joyful than the birth of a child and the celebration of that birth.

Advent means waiting expectantly for the arrival of a child—The Child—Jesus, the Messiah. And the only thing that exceeds the anticipation of that great day is the joyful arrival of that day. The celebration of the birth of Jesus, for Christians, brings our hopes and expectations and waiting to a joyous climax on Christmas day. By the grace of God, believers are part of the remnant of the faithful who are called to bring the joy of the arrival of Jesus to a broken and hurting world. In the remaining days before the great arrival of the joyous day, pray for a heightened sensitivity to those broken and hurting individuals who may need the joy you have known in Christ.

As you wait for that day and as your expectations rise, open your heart to the joy that the arrival of Jesus can bring. And as the joy of the birth of Jesus fills your heart, allow your heart to overflow so that others might be blessed by your witness.

An honest examination of ourselves would probably reveal that we spend a large portion of our lives seeking out happiness. Whether this pursuit is conscious or subconscious, it is human nature to gravitate to those situations in which we find pleasure, fulfillment, and security.

Is this wrong? Should the life of a Christian be defined by the quest for happiness in a fallen world characterized by temporal pleasures dependent upon unpredictable circumstances? Doesn't the phrase, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," validate this effort for Americans regardless of religious persuasion?

Our friends and family become concerned about us if we are not happy, don't they? Would any of us expectantly enter a marriage relationship if we didn't think we would be happy with our future partner? As parents, isn't one of our strongest hopes for our children that they be happy? When research indicates that the majority of Americans are not happy in their jobs, we take pause (and those of us that work at Gardner-Webb think, "How can this be?").

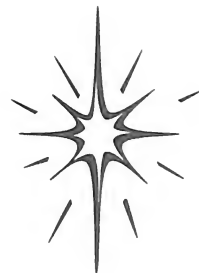
No, striving for happiness is not wrong. I don't think God intends for us to go through life with frowns etched on our faces continually counting up all of our misfortunes.

The problem arises when this pursuit occurs without the foundation of the joy that is provided to all believers through the gift of

God's son, Jesus Christ. Knowing that our sins are forgiven, that we have an eternal home in heaven, that we have a Comforter to help us through times of tragedy and loss should provide us with an overwhelming sense of joy in our spirit.

Joy, unlike happiness, is not dependent on our circumstances, our emotions, or our relationship with others. It is not something we earn; it is something we should gratefully receive and embrace. It gives us the freedom and perspective to seek out happiness as well as the ability to appreciate and navigate through life when happiness seems nowhere to be found.

At this most special time of year, we should once again focus and reflect on God's gift of His son. If we say that the spiritually-related events of the season make us happy, we significantly diminish the importance of God's sacrificial and loving gesture. If, however, we agree with Isaiah when he writes in 42:1 that "My soul delights," we capture the essence of Christmas and lay claim to the promise of a joyous, Christ-centered life.



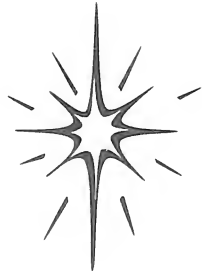
LOVE

SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 21

Isaiah 42:1-12
John 3:16-21

Jeff Tubbs

Vice President
for Planning and
Institutional Effectiveness



LOVE

MONDAY,
DECEMBER 22

Isaiah 11:1-9
John 5:30-47

Anthony Negbenebor
Dean, Godbold School
of Business

As I listened to this year's hurricane Ike survivors and rescuers share their stories, there was a common tapestry among their narrations. Love for one another overcame innate and human created barriers. Neighbors who were enemies searched for one another and families that had not communicated with each other before the devastation longed and prayed for each other. A man was in tears narrating his story to the news media. He said "I have lived in this neighborhood for 8 years with this family and we never one day spoke to each other until today. He saved my life, he pulled me out of the deep water." Another said "I always knew they lived two doors down from me but we were very busy folks and we just did not have the time to get to know each other."

Why do we wait for crises to show our love for one another?

The apostle John admonishes his readers to hold to the truth of the scriptures—which points to Jesus Christ—the way, the truth and the life (5:30-47). He gives practical examples for how showing God's divine love toward one another enables us to live a victorious life. Real love, he says, finds its beginning and ending in God. His initiative, not our so-called effort; His self-sacrifice, not our heralded performances; His gracious mercy and grace (in full view of our sinful ways), not our pretense of worthiness; His redemption, not our righteousness.

As we approach the season of Advent and we celebrate His birth, Jesus wants you to know that He loves you no matter who you are, what you have done or where you have been. Our love for others is sometimes tainted with self-interest but if we truly experience the love of Jesus who came and gave His life for us, then we can love one another selflessly. If we see others as true humanity—beloved in the eyes of God—how can we not love one another?

Are you willing to lay down your life for others just as Jesus did for you? Are you willing to make yourself vulnerable, even put yourself in peril to save another? I have to ask myself, am I using the days I have left to love, love and love?

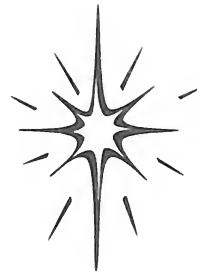
Lord God, help me to love others just as you have loved me.

As I make all the preparations for Christmas this year, I do so with a space in my heart reserved for my grandparents. This will be my first Christmas without them both, having lost them within 9 months of each other. Even though they were in their 90's I honestly don't think I ever truly believed that Granny and Papa would not always be here. To me, their presence was as eternal as the mountains where they spent their lives.

They lived beautifully simple lives, committed to each other and to God; lives of hard work, honesty, frugality, and love of family.

I search for ways that I am like them, hungry for that link, that bond that will forever tie me to them. I garden, can, and freeze like my grandmother did. I am teaching myself to sew, remembering the nightgowns and dolls she made for me. All things that in the not-too-distant past I had no interest in. At times, I catch a glimpse of my hands and see hers. I find comfort in the gospel music that my grandfather loved and that I could not abide in my younger days. I talk to my dogs as my grandfather did to his canine companions on the mountain and wish that I had paid closer attention to the "special language" he used with them. I yearn for one last walk with them up to the cabin on "Papa's Mountain" where he studied his bible and prepared his sermons.

I worry that without them our family has lost the strongest bond that keeps us all together. Families grow, life gets busy, so many responsibilities. But I know that my worries are unfounded. Granny and Papa showed us by example what is most important—God and family. We have the blessing of a cherished cousin's new baby girl, the long awaited marriage of a beloved brother, the memories we share; we have everything we need—each other. And although this Christmas will be different we will do what my grandparents would want us to do—love God; love our family.



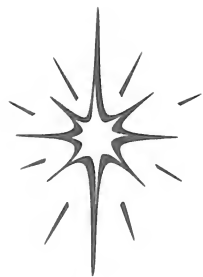
LOVE

TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 23

Isaiah 11:10-16
Luke 1:5-25

Karen Ferree

Administrative Assistant,
Office of the Associate Provosts



LOVE

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 24

Isaiah 28:9-22

Luke 1:26-38

Robert W. Canoy

Dean and Professor
of Christian Theology,
School of Divinity

Probably like you, I've been reading the Christmas story for decades. The "angel Gabriel," "the virgin's name was Mary," "do not be afraid," "the Holy Spirit will come upon you," and "I am the handmaiden of the Lord" are as familiar to me as Jingle Bells. This Christmas Eve, however, I've taken particular interest in the Lord sending His angel Gabriel not just "out-of-town," but out-of-state in search of someone! Yes, the Lord's Angel departs Jerusalem (leaving behind the Holy Temple!) and Judea (home of the Holy City!) and goes way up north to Nazareth of Galilee. Gabriel, as it turns out, goes to find Mary, who up until now is an unknown character in the story. She is miraculously inserted into the line-up of some otherwise important and powerful figures like King Herod (1:5a), Zechariah the Temple Priest (1:5b), Elijah the prophet (1:17), Joseph of the house of David (1:26), and the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus (2:1). Of all people, God casts young, unmarried Mary (1:27) into His drama.

Not only has the Lord's focus shifted geographically away from Jerusalem, He has turned His attention to a girl who hasn't proven herself worthy of any special consideration. She has no rank. She has no power. She doesn't come from a well-to-do family. Nevertheless, she gets a call from God to be a part of something much bigger than herself, something that she considers, frankly, impossible. And

that's precisely when the power of the story hits me! Right then and there the true meaning of Christmas leaps from the story. Christmas is about embracing the "impossibility" that God has done the unimaginable by becoming human, emptying Himself, and taking on the form of a servant (Philip. 2:7). Not only that, but we are reminded that God is still calling women and men to work alongside Him in His world. Yes, Christmas is about believing that God can still do the impossible, and that He just might be calling us to do something unimaginable ourselves.

If yours is like our family, tonight we will attend a Candlelight Service, perhaps drive around to see some Christmas lights, open a few gifts, and share in a traditional family dinner. In the midst of these meaningful events, if we listen carefully, I believe we might just hear the Lord calling us to join Him in doing something that we probably think is impossible. And while we're wrestling with whether or not we can do it, we might also hear: "Is anything impossible with God?"

Our world contains a great deal of skepticism and mistrust. We believe there is “no free lunch,” and we instinctively ask, “What’s the catch?” To this mindset it seems paradoxical that the greatest possible gift—the gift of salvation through God’s grace—would come with absolutely no strings attached. We must only accept this free gift of God’s grace, Jesus our Lord and Savior.

Paradox should surprise no one familiar with the Christmas story and the Christian gospel, though. The Savior of the world was born not in a palace but in a stable, where his mother had arrived not in a state of royalty but riding a donkey. Jesus taught that the meek shall inherit the earth, and the one who would be first must first be last.

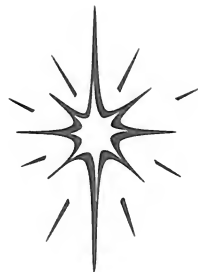
No catches, no conditions. We must understand and accept that we are incapable of fulfilling any condition sufficient to merit God’s gift—it is ours only by the love and the grace of God. We are in no way self-sufficient when it comes to salvation.

The common theme of today’s two scripture passages is the repudiation of self-sufficiency. In the passage from Isaiah, the Lord rebukes those who feel self-sufficient: “The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden” (29.14). Foolish are those who believe they can “hide a plan too deep for the Lord” (29.15). Most foolish of all is the

“thing made” that would say of its maker, “He did not make me” (29.16). In Luke, “Mary’s Song” says that the Lord “has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant” (1:48) and “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (1:52).

My grandmother was a strong woman. With little formal education (she was unable to go even to high school), she raised and supported three children almost single-handedly—my mother and mother’s brother and sister—through hard times that included the Great Depression. As strong as she was, Mama never would have claimed self-sufficiency. Her faith was as strong as it was simple. I remember a great deal about her, including her telling me, very simply, that the Bible teaches us to call upon the name of the Lord. “And I do,” she said. Indeed she did.

At Christmas we exchange gifts with family and friends. All sorts of meaning, and perhaps conditions, are associated with them. But the greatest gift comes with only the condition that we accept it, and that we accept it with the knowledge that it comes solely from the love and grace of God.



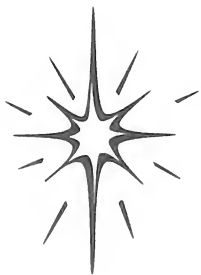
LOVE

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 25

Isaiah 29:13-24
Luke 1:39-66

A. Frank Bonner

President of
the University

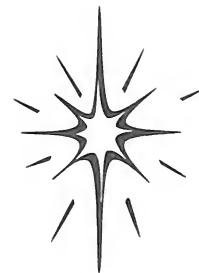


Advent Reflections

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Prayer Requests

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be from a notebook or a standard ruled sheet of paper. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

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- In addition to 45 major programs of study in our undergraduate division, Gardner-Webb offers a Graduate School, a Graduate School of Business, and a Divinity School, which together enroll over 1,200 students
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